

The **ABC's** of Growing Healthy Kids

GOOD TIMES at MEALTIMES

“Please pass the love, unity, and spaghetti.”

An unlikely request? Perhaps. But in truth, that’s what you give your child when you sit down together at the family table.

This quote from Connie Evers, registered dietitian, in her article “Bringing Back Mealtime” (*Healthy Kids Magazine*, December ’94/January ’95), emphasizes the importance of family mealtimes. Getting everyone together for a meal can seem like an impossible task. But the benefits of eating together make family mealtime a tradition worth pursuing.

Why Eat Together?

- Nutrition. Studies show that most people eat more balanced meals and a wider variety of foods when they eat with family or friends. Shared meals also save money.
- Tradition. Food served at the family table helps to shape and give lasting meaning to our cultural heritage. Positive food memories created during childhood are cherished for life.
- Family bond. One strength of emotionally healthy families is that they spend time together. This includes eating meals together on a routine basis. Family meals offer a chance to communicate, helping to build a stronger bond and commitment to one another.

Making the Most of Family Mealtimes

Just sitting together at the table does not always lead to fascinating family conversations or warm mealtime memories. Here are some ideas for making the most of family mealtimes.

1. Make family mealtimes a priority.

Emphasize the importance of mealtime together. If you’re like most families, you’re caught in a time crunch. Adults and youth all may hold jobs. There are sports, dance lessons, music lessons, homework, a house to clean, clothes to wash, perhaps an older parent or relative to care for, and many other obligations.

If you’re not eating together as a family, make a decision about your family priorities—and consider dropping at least one thing before you add time for family meals.

2. Make mealtimes pleasant.

Children learn social skills from watching and listening to you. Share positive things that have happened during the day. Postpone negative conversation about behavior until another time.

Use some preplanned questions to enhance family conversation. Here are samples:

- Tell us something that happened recently that made you feel really happy.

- Someone has given you \$1,000. You have to spend some of it on your family before you can buy anything for yourself. What would you buy for everyone?
- If you could spend an afternoon with a famous person (living or dead), who would you pick?

3. Serve a variety of healthy foods.

Use the food guide pyramid and family preferences as a guide when planning meals. It is the parent's job to offer a variety of foods in a pleasant atmosphere; the child's job is to choose how much and whether or not to eat.

4. Keep meals simple and easy.

Save the elaborate menus for when you have time to prepare and enjoy them. Simple foods served with love and laughter will outshine gourmet goodies almost any time.

5. Eliminate interruptions and distractions.

Turn off the television and radio. Use an answering machine or voice mail if it's hard to refrain from responding to a ringing phone while you are eating. If there are calls you need to answer immediately, such as those from an ill parent, get caller I.D.

6. Get everyone involved in meals.

Give each person a task, such as choosing the menu, setting the table, making a salad, or cleaning up. The skills your children will learn include teamwork and cooperation.

Shared meals can be a time to take a deep breath, enjoy each other's company, strengthen relationships, and savor good food.

*Keep it simple
Keep it fun
Just keep it!*



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